

SUMMARY REPORT

for the

The City of Somerville's Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Resident Survey

Background

In early 2009, facing a significant reduction in the City of Somerville's annual state aid allocation, Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone solicited input from residents on how the City could save money, generate additional revenue, and make municipal government more efficient. The Administration created an online budget survey as well as a "City Spotlight" webpage outlining the FY2010 budget development process. Visitors to the City's website can download a number of budget-related PowerPoint presentations, op-eds, the findings of the Mayor's Financial Advisory Committee (FAC), and other important information.

The Budget Survey, along with the new webpage, was promoted by press coverage and electronic mailings sent to various resident-centered email lists (ResiStat groups, Mystery Customers, etc.). The survey contained five questions designed to capture residents' funding priorities as well as specific suggestions to cut costs, enhance revenues, or streamline operations. Residents were asked to provide their name and contact information, but they were also given alternative means of submitting suggestions anonymously.

The following report summarizes the responses of 126 residents who submitted their opinions and suggestions via the online survey, email, or by calling the City's 311 – hotline.

General Funding Priorities

The first two questions of the survey presented the respondent with the following list of categories of municipal programmatic spending:

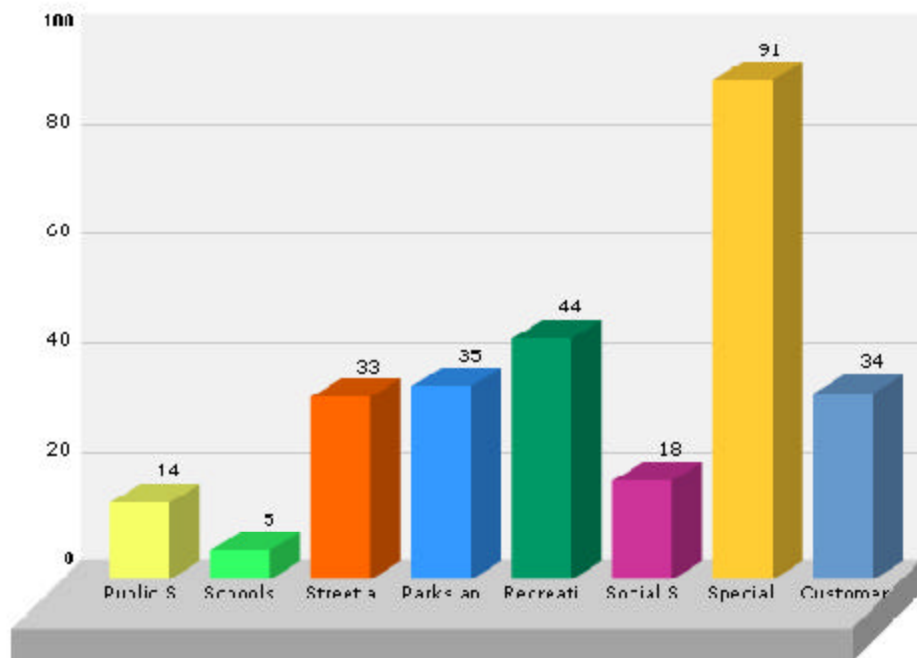
- Public Safety
- Schools
- Street and Sidewalk Maintenance
- Parks & Open Space
- Recreational Programs
- Social Services
- Special Events
- Customer Service

The first question asked residents to identify one or more areas where they felt that the City could spend less. The second question asked them to identify areas where they would like to see the City spend more. The results from each question are shown in the bar graphs below. Residents were allowed to choose more than one category for increased or decreased spending – so the total numbers of "votes" is greater than the total number of survey-respondents.

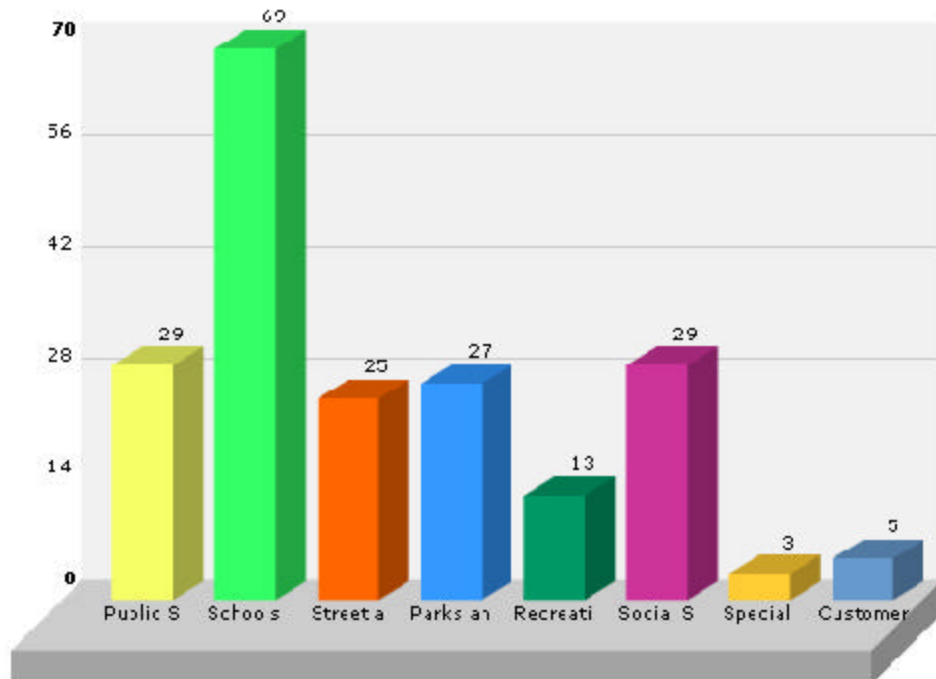
1. In which of the following areas do you think the City of Somerville could expend less or cut costs?

Ninety-one residents (75%) suggested Somerville spend less on Special Events (fireworks, festivals, parades, etc.) compared to only three who wanted to spend more. 44 residents voted to spend less on Recreational Programs compared to just 13 residents who wanted to spend more in that category. While 35 residents voted to spend less on Parks & Open Space, 27 residents voted to spend more in that area, indicating that residents are relatively split on this issue.

I. Budget Survey In which of the following areas do you think the City of Somerville could expend less or cut costs? (Please check all that apply)



In which of the following areas do you think the City of Somerville should increase its spending? (Please check all that apply)



2. In which of the following areas do you think the City of Somerville should increase its spending?

Sixty-nine residents (57%) would prefer Somerville spends more on schools and educational programs, compared to just five residents who voted to spend less. After the schools and education responses, the next clearest mandate was for more spending on public safety, which received 29 votes, compared to just 14 votes for less spending in that category.

Open-Ended Question Results

The remaining three questions in the Survey asked for specific suggestions on how the City could cut costs, increase revenues, and improve or streamline services. Responses were open-ended and, while each answer was different, similar themes and ideas could be identified and recorded.

3. Do you have any specific suggestions on how Somerville can cut its operational expenses/costs?

The responses are summarized in the chart below in the order of the ideas mentioned most frequently to those mentioned the least.

Suggestions for Cutting Costs	Count
Utilize volunteer and student labor, partner with Tufts, Harvard, and MIT, as well as local businesses for skilled labor or sponsorships	25
Reduce Street Sweeping	16
Cutback on Special Events	12
Reorganize staffing to save on personnel; cut non-essential employees and use less space	10
Increase Technology/Electronic Records/Automated Billing	8
Increase energy efficiency/reduce energy consumption	7
Monitor and reduce OT, analyze cost effectiveness of new hires to reduce OT	6
Wage freeze/furloughs	6
Reduce recreational programs	4
Renegotiate medical/retirement benefits	4
Reduce Lawn and Grounds Maintenance	3
Reduce library hours at branches	3
Regulate automated sprinklers; don't run on rainy days	3
4-day work week/reduce hours for non-essential employees	3
Mandatory recycling and/or composting; enforce with tickets	3
Build wind turbines for the City	3
Track use and locations of City vehicles	2
Group purchasing with other jurisdictions	2
Stop putting signs on light poles	2
Fewer park construction projects	2
Reduce length of school year	2
Use existing building space instead of renting space	2
Offer early retirement to highest paid employees	2
Review Snow Plowing Policy	1
Reduce Traffic & Parking enforcement	1
Stop issuing paper notices on street cleaning	1
Reduce spending on PR	1
Decrease reliance on union employees	1
Turn off holiday lights after season and during day	1
Stop sending envelopes with bills	1
Make biodiesel from fry oil from local restaurants	1
Stop having Police, Fire and ambulance all respond to 911 calls	1
Eliminate Gas Cards	1
Cut down on City vehicle idling	1
Pick up residential trash every other week	1
Organize communal motor pool for heavy equipment with other jurisdictions	1
Fewer bike lanes	1
Spend less building/maintaining dog parks	1

Twenty-five respondents mentioned soliciting volunteers to assist in the City's schools and libraries or clean and maintain our parks and buildings. Many suggested that the City coordinate a citywide volunteer campaign and build partnerships with local institutions of higher education as well as with local businesses.

The next most popular suggestion, made by 16 respondents, was to reduce the number of street sweepings in half. The response from a resident on Craigie Street covers both of these responses:

“While I love the cleanliness of the city, street sweeping could be cut in half without anyone noticing. Perhaps more of the City's maintenance and upkeep could be accomplished through a volunteer campaign like Clean-Up Somerville - on a larger, more comprehensive scale.”

Similarly, a resident on Willow Avenue wrote the following:

“As much as I like clean streets, perhaps street sweeping can be cut back a little. ...Maybe people can take more responsibility for their properties. For example, in many countries, children spend the last 10 minutes of their school day cleaning the school--sweeping the floor, washing the tables, putting chairs on top of tables, washing windows, even shoveling snow off sidewalks. This could cut down on janitorial staff hours.”

Several other prominent suggestions for cutting costs included spending less on special events, reorganizing city staffing, upgrading technology to enable electronic recordkeeping, file-sharing, and automated billing, and reducing energy consumption.

4. Please describe how the City of Somerville could enhance its revenues? Feel free to suggest one-time revenue boosts such as from the sale of a City-owned property, or fee increases/new charges for City services that would result in additional revenue each year.

Ways to Increase Revenue	Count
Implement Citywide permit parking/increase Permit cost	18
Implement PAYT/Trash fee	10
Sell city-owned property	9
Increase cost of residential guest parking passes	8
Start enforcing traffic violations that pose a real threat to public safety, e.g., bad intersections with red-light- and stop-sign-running, speeding, other dangerous maneuvers	7
Charge reasonable fee on a sliding scale for pre-K and all-day Kindergarten programs	6
Raise parking meter rates	5
Student fees for activities & materials; means-tested	5
Increase Property tax	4
Revenue generating events (i.e. summer concerts & festivals, fundraiser raffles)	4
Increase Snow ticketing	4
Increase Recreational program/facility fees and market to other communities	3
Increase fees for business parking permits to non-residents who work in Somerville	3
Sell DPW services (tree trimming, paving, etc.) and/or products homeowners need at DPW Yard (i.e. snow shovels, rain barrels, compost bins, hoses, etc.)	3
Charge fees to groups using City playgrounds for parking	2
Increase PILOTs for Tufts and other nonprofits	2
Ticket for jaywalking	2

Raise alcohol & tobacco taxes	2
Revisit residential exemption program	2
Ticket for parking in front of fire hydrants	2
More aggressive revenue collection	2
Increase taxes on large chain stores/businesses	2
Enforce Noise ordinance	1
Somerville Savings Bonds	1
City gas tax	1
Use City-owned space as incubators for businesses	1
Streamline process and increase detail fees for groups using City bldgs.	1
Detail Fees for road races	1
Tow cars not moved for street cleaning	1
Ticket for littering and smoking in parks	1
Ticket and collect fines for animal control violations	1
Charge utilities fees for failing to remove unused lines	1
License cats, increase license fees for unaltered animals	1

There were eighteen respondents who indicated that they would be in favor of either citywide permit parking or increased parking permit fees (or both) as a means of increasing revenue. A few respondents also suggested charging higher parking permit fees for larger cars, which would promote smaller, fuel efficient vehicles and increase the number of available spots on permit parking streets.

Ten residents suggested instituting a trash fee and a mandatory recycling program (enforced with fines), both as a way to recover some of the trash hauling and tipping costs but also as a way to increase recycling rates.

A resident on Beacon St. wrote:

“...Make recycling not only encouraged in Somerville but enforced, as NYC and San Francisco already do with much success. Issue citations for disposing of recyclable items in the regular trash. My parents in New York once got a \$100 ticket for throwing out soda bottles in the trash, and they never did it again. The Department of Sanitation or Public Works issues these tickets during regular collection duty.”

Other common suggestions included the selling of city-owned properties, increased traffic enforcement, and charging fees for pre-kindergarten and all-day kindergarten classes.

5. Please share your ideas on how Somerville can improve services without increasing their costs.

No-Cost Ways to Improve City Services	Count
More volunteer-run programs	10
Increase internal controls - Timecards, departmental time management stats, and weekly evaluation of how personnel allocate their time is essential to improving services. Increase performance reviews.	6
Increase online services, improve website (esp. school system website)	5

Cut patronage	2
Expand evening/weekend hours	2
Encourage church and civic groups to adopt streets and parks	1
Promote neighborhood watch groups	1
Hire local residents	1
Bicycle registration program	1
Urbanize suburban parking codes	1
Inclusive education	1

Answers to this last question tended to overlap with those from the preceding two questions, such as the call to make the most of more volunteer participation in municipal operations. The next two most common responses focused upon increasing the City's internal controls and increasing the types of services and transactions that can be completed online.

How Are the Survey Results Reflected in the FY2010 Proposed Budget?

The charts below show the ideas for cutting costs and increasing revenue that residents suggested most often (from the tables above), with an additional column showing if and how these suggestions are reflected in the city's FY2010 proposed budget.

Suggestions for Cutting Costs	Count	Reflected in FY2010 Proposed Budget?
Utilize volunteer and student labor, partner with Tufts, Harvard, and MIT as well as with local businesses for skilled labor or sponsorships	25	Yes: Added a part-time Volunteer Coordinator position to the Personnel Dept. to engage and organize volunteer opportunities.
Less Street Sweeping	16	No: Tonnage picked up by street sweepers suggests current schedule is needed.
Cut Special Events	12	No: Minimal impact on budget.
Reorganize staffing to save on personnel, cut non-essential employees and use less space	10	Yes: Targeted layoffs and staffing changes were implemented in several departments for the FY2010 budget year. These actions helped to reduce operating costs without impacting service levels or delivery.
Technology/Electronic Records/Automated Billing	8	The City is aiming to include funds for new integrated financial software in the capital improvement plan.

Increase energy efficiency/reduce energy use	7	Yes: The City recently completed a number of ESCO projects which upgraded facilities and systems citywide. The FY2010 budget includes funds for a commissioning agent, who will be ensuring the City is achieving the ESCO contract's guaranteed energy savings.
Monitor and reduce OT, analyze cost effectiveness of new hires to reduce OT	6	Yes: The Police Department's reorganization was implemented half way through FY2009, resulting in reduced usage of OT. The FY2010 Police OT budget was reduced as a result.
Wage freeze/furloughs	6	Yes: One- and two-week furloughs and wage freezes were implemented for all non-union employees, as well as the Police Patrolmen, Police Superior Officers, and E-911 unions.
Reduce spending on recreational programs	4	Yes: Targeted layoffs were implemented in the Recreation Dept. without reducing programming levels.
Renegotiate medical/retirement benefits	4	Yes: Employee and retiree contributions for health insurance benefits were increased resulting in savings that were built into the FY2010 operating budget
Less Lawn and Grounds Maintenance	3	The City is soliciting quotes for lawn maintenance with the future goal of reducing expenditures.

Ways to Increase Revenue	Count	Reflected in FY2010 Proposed Budget?
Citywide permit parking/incr. Permit cost	18	Yes: The Traffic Commission has voted to give the City to ability to implement residential permit parking citywide, to increase meter rates and hours of operations, and step up parking enforcement measures. City officials are currently working with community representatives to develop a phased implementation plan.
PAYT/Trash fee	10	Like most communities, Somerville is aggressively pursuing all options to decrease solid waste tonnage and increase recycling rates.

Sell city-owned property	9	Yes: Somerville currently is undergoing a Municipal Space Needs Analysis, which will identify any city-owned surplus properties.
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